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ABSTRACT

This testimony provides a review of sexual harassment at the U.S. Military Academy, the U.S. Naval Academy, and the U.S. Air Force Academy. Information on the extent to which sexual harassment occurred at the academies, the forms it took, its effects on those subjected to it, as well as the academies' efforts to eradicate sexual harassment is presented. This review contains the following sections: (1) Background; (2) Results in Brief; (3) Sexual Harassment Continues at the Academies; (4) Women at the Academies Tend To Deal with Sexual Harassment Informally; (5) Sexual Harassment Can Produce Stress; (6) Academy Programs Generally Met DOD Standards; (7) Additional Steps Taken by the Academies; (8) Academies Have Not Evaluated Their Sexual Harassment Eradication Programs in a Routine, Systematic Manner; (9) Other Options for Sexual Harassment Prevention Programs; and (10) Conclusions. In summary, data being collected by the academies is not adequate to judge their progress in eradicating sexual harassment. Without trend data to determine whether sexual harassment is declining, the academies will not be able to assess the effectiveness of their programs or to decide whether to continue existing programs, restructure them, or institute new ones. (EH)

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DOD SERVICE ACADEMIES

Further Efforts Needed to Eradicate Sexual Harassment

Statement by Mark E. Gebicke, Director,
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ED 384 555

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our review of sexual harassment at the U.S. Military Academy, the U.S. Naval Academy, and the U.S. Air Force Academy. We undertook this review at the request of Senators Nunn and Glenn, following several highly publicized incidents that occurred at the Naval Academy in 1989 and 1990.

I will be presenting information on the extent to which sexual harassment occurred at the academies, the forms it took, and its effects on those subjected to it, as well as the academies' efforts to eradicate sexual harassment. Our report, DOD Service Academies: More Actions Needed to Eliminate Sexual Harassment (GAO/NSIAD-94-6, Jan. 31, 1994), provides the detailed results of our review. Some preliminary results were first presented at a hearing before the Subcommittee on Manpower and Personnel on June 2, 1992.

In conducting this review, we used a variety of data sources. We reviewed academy files on sexual misconduct cases, internal and external studies, and other indicators (such as student publications and posters hung on bulletin boards). We administered questionnaires to academy students, faculty members, and the Commandant's staff at each of the academies during late 1990 and early 1991. We reviewed the results of more recent surveys conducted by the academies to determine whether our results were still valid. Also, we conducted focus group meetings and informally met with other students to validate information from other sources. The data we collected from the academies covered 1988 to 1993.

BACKGROUND

Sexual harassment can be broadly defined as words, gestures, or actions with sexual connotations which are unwelcome and tend to intimidate, alarm, or abuse another person. It has been reported as a problem throughout American society, including the private sector, the federal civil service, the military, and the academic world. Accordingly, sexual harassment reflects a societal problem. A number of studies have found that more than half of the female college students surveyed reported experiencing some form of harassment. In addition, a 1993 Harris Poll of public school students in grades 8 through 11, commissioned by the American Association of University Women, showed that four of every five students have experienced some form of sexual harassment in school.

The Department of Defense (DOD) established a Human Goals Charter in 1969 that calls for respect for the serviceman, servicewoman, civilian employee, and their family members. The charter is the foundation of DOD's equal opportunity programs. DOD also has a formal policy to provide "an environment free from sexual harassment." In July 1991, the Secretary of Defense directed each

DOD component to implement a program to eradicate sexual harassment and established seven minimum requirements for such a program.

RESULTS IN BRIEF

The academies have not met the goals of DOD's Human Goals Charter or its policy of providing an environment that is free from sexual harassment. Although relatively few cases of sexual harassment were formally reported, responses to our survey indicated that nearly all academy women reported experiencing at least one form of sexual harassment during academic year 1991. The most common forms of harassment were verbal comments. Our survey also showed a relationship between students experiencing a high degree of sexual harassment and those feeling stress.

The academies generally have met and gone beyond the minimum requirements DOD has established for sexual harassment eradication programs. For example, the academies have published policy statements on the issue and have conducted prompt and thorough investigations of reported incidents. Among the additional actions taken by the academies are more extensive tracking and monitoring of incidents and providing more options for reporting and dealing with harassment.

However, the inspectors general have not conducted reviews at the academies that included sexual harassment prevention and education as an item of special interest. Moreover, none of the academies has developed usable trend data to assess the effectiveness of its sexual harassment eradication program. The Military and Air Force academies have not conducted routine, systematic program evaluations. A disciplined evaluation approach is critical to determining whether current efforts to eradicate harassment are working or new efforts should be tried.

In reviewing the efforts of other organizations, we also identified several approaches to sexual harassment prevention that may prove effective at the academies.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT CONTINUES AT THE ACADEMIES

The vast majority of men reported never having experienced sexual harassment. We found that between half to about three quarters of academy women experienced one or more of the following forms of harassment at least twice a month:[1]

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[1]The 10 forms of harassment that were included in our survey were derived from previous surveys of harassment conducted among federal workers by the Merit Systems Protection Board in 1980 and 1987 and a 1988 survey of active duty military personnel conducted by the Defense Manpower Data Center. We tailored the items somewhat to the academy environments.

-- derogatory comments, jokes, nicknames, or stories;

-- comments that standards have been lowered for women;

-- comments that women don't belong;

-- offensive posters, signs, graffiti, T-shirts, or pictures;

-- mocking gestures (whistles, catcalls, mock accents, slang expressions, etc.);

-- derogatory letters or messages;

-- exclusion from social activities, informal gatherings, or excursions;

-- target of unwanted horseplay or hijinks;

-- unwanted pressure for dates by a more senior student; and

-- unwanted sexual advances.

The harassment women experienced usually was verbal in nature. Few reported unwanted pressure for dates or unwanted sexual advances. Women said the basis for the harassment was most often gender, rather than race, religion, or ethnic origin.

Academy faculty and staff also perceived that sexual harassment of women was a problem. For instance, between 41 and 59 percent of the commandant's staff at each academy and between 32 and 40 percent of the faculty perceived that the average female academy student was exposed to some form of sexual harassment on a recurring basis.

Academy studies conducted in 1992 and 1993 confirmed that sexual harassment remains a problem at the academies. In a 1993 Naval Academy climate assessment, 53 percent of the female students and 31 percent of the male students indicated sexual harassment (subtle or overt) was a problem at the Academy. A Military Academy survey of the senior class of 1993 indicated 80 percent of female cadets either observed or personally experienced sexist comments in the last year. In a March 1992 Air Force Academy survey, 78 percent of the female students and 52 percent of the males said that they had heard sexist or demeaning remarks about women on a daily basis. Because the methodologies of these studies were not consistent with our methodology, we were not able to evaluate whether the level of sexual harassment had changed.

WOMEN AT THE ACADEMIES TEND TO DEAL WITH SEXUAL HARASSMENT INFORMALLY

Research has found that because of a long history of silence on the subject, many women feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or ashamed when they talk about personal incidents of sexual harassment. Women tend to deal with harassment informally through various coping behaviors, such as approaching the harasser, avoiding the harasser, denying the incident occurred, or making a joke of the situation.

Consistent with this research, we found that only a small fraction of sexual harassment complaints were formally reported. For example, our survey showed that between 93 and 97 percent of academy women reported experiencing at least one form of sexual harassment during academic year 1991. However, only 26 incidents were formally reported, and most of these involved more grievous forms of sexual misconduct. For instance, the most common type of reported behavior involved a male student entering a female student's room after hours and making unwanted sexual advances (such as kissing, touching, fondling) toward the sleeping student.

The academies have many channels for surfacing grievances. Students perceived that confronting the harasser was the most effective strategy. They also generally felt that reporting an incident of sexual harassment through the chain of command would make things better, the incident would be thoroughly investigated, and the offender would be disciplined. However, most students also saw negative consequences of reporting an incident, such as receiving little support from peers, being viewed as a crybaby, being shunned, and receiving lower military performance grades.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT CAN PRODUCE STRESS

Our survey results indicate that sexual harassment can have detrimental effects on cadets and midshipmen. We found a correlation between a student's reported exposure to sexual harassment and higher levels of stress. For example, we found that students who reported experiencing a high degree of harassment also reported experiencing frequent feelings of self-doubt. Also, levels of stress were correlated with decreased interest in staying at the academy and making the military a career. However, because many factors may contribute to stress, we could not draw a direct link between harassment and decreased interest in staying at the academy and making the military a career.

ACADEMY PROGRAMS GENERALLY MET DOD STANDARDS

Sexual harassment eradication programs at each of the academies generally met the minimum criteria established by DOD. For example, each academy

-- issued a policy statement on sexual harassment, though the content varied as to the extent of information on ways to deal with sexual harassment and on the consequences of harassing someone;

-- offered training as part of leadership courses or human relations/equal opportunity training courses; and

-- took some steps to evaluate its equal opportunity climate, although there was not always a clear link between the evaluation results and changes in training or other programs.

One area where the academies had not met the DOD criteria was inspector general reviews that included sexual harassment as a focus of special interest. The Navy Inspector General intends to examine sexual harassment during an inspection scheduled for late 1994. The Air Force Inspection Agency has scheduled such a review at the Air Force Academy for 1995. While the Army Inspector General has no plans to conduct a review, the Military Academy Inspector General recently conducted an equal opportunity climate assessment that included Academy students.

ADDITIONAL STEPS TAKEN BY THE ACADEMIES

DOD has stated that it is aware of continuing problems and is comprehensively addressing these problems at each of the academies. It also stated that the service academies are leading institutions in establishing gender and racial tolerant climates.

The academies have taken a number of actions regarding their sexual harassment prevention and education programs that go beyond the minimum elements outlined in the 1991 DOD memorandum. The additional steps include tracking and monitoring sexual harassment incidents, establishing sexual harassment hotlines, providing counseling support networks, employing lessons learned from actual sexual harassment incidents in training situations, conducting student surveys and discussions on sexual harassment and sexual misconduct, providing training on fraternization, teaching students how to write a letter to a harasser to stop the offensive behavior, offering training on chill in the classroom[2] and prevention of date-rape, and making various other institutional changes in dealing with human relations concerns.

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[2]The Military Academy defines a "chilly" classroom as an atmosphere that alienates any student group from the learning process. The Association of American Colleges describes a chilly classroom climate as a learning climate that subtly or overtly communicates different expectations for women than for men.

ACADEMIES HAVE NOT EVALUATED THEIR SEXUAL HARASSMENT ERADICATION PROGRAMS IN A ROUTINE, SYSTEMATIC MANNER

The academies have evaluated their sexual harassment eradication programs to varying degrees. The Naval Academy has conducted three assessments of its equal opportunity climate since 1990 by surveying and interviewing students and collecting other types of data. The assessments have focused on identifying equal opportunity/sexual harassment problems and recommending solutions. However, the Naval Academy had difficulty compiling the data needed for these assessments, and the data developed for each assessment cannot be readily compared to analyze trends. The Military and Air Force academies have also evaluated elements of their equal opportunity programs, but these efforts were less focused and systematic than the evaluation approach taken by the Naval Academy.

OTHER OPTIONS FOR SEXUAL HARASSMENT PREVENTION PROGRAMS

As part of their sexual harassment eradication programs, other institutions (such as the Coast Guard Academy and the American Council on Education) have undertaken efforts that may have applicability at the DOD academies. Examples of these actions include preparing and distributing pamphlets or brochures on the issue; expanding the explanation of the range of behaviors that can be regarded as sexual harassment; offering a variety of personal strategies for dealing with sexual harassment; and varying the methods used in, and the content of, sexual harassment prevention training. For example, additional personal strategies could include seeking advice in confidence or using a third party for help in resolving the issue or in accompanying the victim when talking with the harasser.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we believe academy officials have recognized the seriousness of sexual harassment problems at their institutions and have taken significant steps aimed at meeting DOD's goal of eradicating sexual harassment. However, the data being collected by the academies is not adequate to judge their progress. Without trend data to determine whether sexual harassment is declining, the academies will not be able to assess the effectiveness of their programs or to decide whether to continue existing programs, restructure them, or institute new ones. In our report we make recommendations to the academy superintendents to help fill the gaps in the academies' sexual harassment programs.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to respond to any questions from you or members of the Subcommittee.

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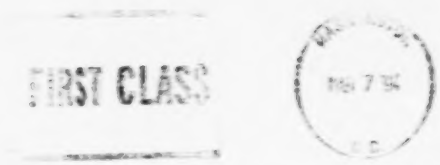

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